



Play Therapy

“Life must be lived as play. “

- *Plato*

1. What is play therapy?
2. Who can benefit from play therapy?
3. How does play therapy benefit a child?
5. Play therapy for individuals with autism
6. Play therapy for individuals with ADHD
7. Play therapy for siblings of children with special needs
8. The play therapy program at *A Total Approach*
9. References

What Is Play Therapy?

If play is a child’s language, then toys can be thought of as the words. Through play therapy the child can work through their challenges and issues using the toys that they choose, revealing their inner dialogue. Through play the child is able to test out various situations and behaviors in a supportive environment. *Unconditional positive regard* and acceptance encourages the child to feel safe enough to be able to explore their inner selves without censorship. In this environment children are able to try out different roles, work through conflicting emotions and thoughts, and try to figure out what the world is like. The child is able to form a relationship with the provider, and through this relationship they are able to develop trust, improved self-esteem, and self-efficacy.

In *non-directive play therapy*, the child is in control, within some gently but firmly set limits. Children often feel that they do not have control over situations in their lives. Through play therapy they are able to work through these experiences in an environment that they are able to control. They can make the story be how they want it to be, they are in charge of the outcome. This feeling of control is vital to their emotional development as well as positive mental health. Children are able to use play as a means for developing problem-solving skills, ways to relate to others, expressing their feelings, and working on their behaviors, all at a safe psychological distance from reality.

For more information about play therapy, visit the Association for Play Therapy website:
<http://www.a4pt.org>

Who Can Benefit From Play Therapy?

Play therapy can be used with children and adolescents who are suffering from social, emotional, behavioral and learning problems, such as:

- Anger management difficulties
- Grief and loss
- Divorce
- Crisis or trauma, such as: abuse, domestic violence, natural disasters
- Low self-esteem
- Siblings of children with disabilities
- Autism
- ADHD
- Other concerns, such as: Anxiety, depression, academic or social developmental problems, learning or physical disabilities

How Does Play Therapy Benefit a Child?

Play therapy is designed for and responsive to the unique and varied developmental needs of each client. As most children under the age of 11 do not have a fully developed capacity for abstract thinking, they are unable to express themselves fully through words, or understand more complex issues, feelings and motives. It has been shown to provide significant improvement in children, as compared to those who did not receive play therapy. There has also been an increase in the literature for child therapy on the emphasis on play as the ideal way to treat social and emotional difficulties (Bratton, Ray, Rhine & Jones, 2005; Josefi & Ryan, 2004).

Play Therapy for Individuals with Autism

As play therapy has been shown to be effective with children who have social and emotional difficulties, it fits with some of the treatment goals of autism. Using unconditional positive regard, the child is accepted at their current level of functioning along with the assumption that they have an intrinsic drive towards improved functioning. This allows children who have autism to be able to work at a pace and focus on change that is fitting to them, increasing self-efficacy and autonomy. In autism research it has been strongly advocated that the therapeutic interventions need to be attuned to the individual child's developmental level. Play therapy automatically operates at the child's current level and is highly individualized, as the children determine the pace and focus of change (Josefi & Ryan, 2004).

A case study was done on a 6½ year old boy who was diagnosed with severe autism. Throughout the 16 play therapy sessions that he attended, there was shown to be improvement in pretend play, attachment, social interaction, self-regulation of need for nurture, coping with changes, emotional responsiveness and autonomy (Josefi & Ryan 2004).

Play Therapy for Individuals with ADHD

Play therapy has been shown to have significant impact on the individual and relational lives of children who have been diagnosed with ADHD. Children who have participated in play therapy have been shown to be less stressful to their teachers, specifically regarding anxiety, emotional distress and difficulties with withdrawal. Play therapy has had a positive impact on general behavioral problems, internalizing problems, externalizing behavioral problems, self-concept, self-efficacy, depression, anxiety, and treatment compliance (Ray, Schottelkorb, & Tsai, 2007).

Play Therapy for Siblings of Children with Special Needs

Having a child with special needs impacts the entire family. Oftentimes parents turn to support networks for encouragement and to not feel alone in their experiences. However, the siblings of the child with special needs are often left to cope without such a network, even though “brothers and sisters of children with special needs have concerns that in many ways parallel their parents’ experience” (Meyer, 1993, pg 1). Studies have shown that siblings of children with chronic health problems are more likely than their peers to experience behavioral or adjustment problems. They often have conflicting feelings about their siblings, and the impact on the family. Having a means to explore these feelings in a supportive environment is a healthy way to counteract these conflicts.

Siblings of children with special needs have been shown to have some concerns such as: *over identification* – where they fear they may also have the condition that their sibling has, *pressure to achieve* – they feel that they need to be greater achievers in academics or sports, *guilt* – feeling that they may have caused the condition, or even guilt that they do not have it, *resentment* – when the focus of the family’s attention is on the child with special needs, or when the child with special needs is able to do what is unacceptable for the siblings. Also, siblings tend to be concerned about the future of the child with special needs, as well as their own futures (Meyer, 1993).

The Play Therapy Program at A Total Approach

The play therapy program at A Total Approach consists of individual sessions with the child in the play therapy room, working through areas of concern in a supportive non-directive manner. The parent/s will be informed of the themes and patterns that are appearing in the child’s play, however not the specifics of the actual play so as to keep the trust relationship and bonding between the child and therapist. The child will work at their pace towards an improvement in self-efficacy, autonomy and well-being.

References:

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